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ABSTRACT

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The Relationship of Achievement and Peer Status to Teacher Attitudes Toward Young Children

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Running head: TEACHER ATTITUDES

Abstract

The relationships between teacher attitudes about children, children's peer relations, and achievement orientation were investigated. Eighteen preschool children were administered the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) and a standard sociometric nomination procedure as measures of achievement and peer status, respectively. Fourteen student teachers involved in a practicum experience responded to an attitude measurement procedure designed to assess attitudes of Attachment, Rejection, Concern, and Indifference (ARCI). Kendall correlation coefficients indicated a significant relationship between teacher attitudes toward children and children's peer relations. Children who were popular in their peer group were nominated as highly attached by their teachers. Inversely, children's peer rejection correlated positively with teacher concern and rejection, while correlating negatively with teacher attachment. Teachers also were attached to high achieving children and rejected or were concerned about low achieving children. The implications for student-teacher relationships and educational environments are discussed.

The Relationship of Achievement and Peer Status to Teacher Attitudes Toward Young Children

The initial application of the concept of self-fulfilling prophecies to teacher-child relationships (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968) created a great deal of interest in the effects of teacher expectations on student achievement. This line of research continues to be an area of considerable interest (Brophy, 1983). Brophy and Good (1970) have expanded the concept of expectations and proposed that any systematic teacher behaviors, including beliefs and attitudes, may affect student achievement. A preliminary step in understanding the effects of teacher attitudes on student achievement is to investigate the characteristics of students that influence teacher attitudes.

In an early study, Silberman (1969) used a content analysis of teacher descriptions of elementary-aged students to derive four distinct teacher attitudes towards children. These attitudes were labeled attachment, rejection, concern, and indifference. Attachment was defined as an affectionate tie derived from the pleasure a child brings to a teacher's work. Children who were rejected were seen as not being worthy of professional energies. Concern was characterized by sympathy and support for academic and emotional problems. Finally, indifference was defined as a lack of involvement due to the child failing to excite or dismay the teacher.

In subsequent studies, Jenkins (1972) and Evertson, Brophy, and Good (1973) used classroom observations to identify the characteristics

of students who elicit these teacher attitudes. Teacher interviews (Willis & Brophy, 1974) and teacher ratings of students (Brophy & Good, 1974) have also been employed to investigate this relationship. Brophy and Evertson (1981) integrated these findings with other lines of research to obtain profiles of attachment, rejection, concern, and indifference children.

In these profiles, attachment children were typically described by teachers as being high achieving, responsible, model students who conformed to the role of a student. These children were likely to be girls, and were called on and praised more often in class than other children. Teachers saw rejected children as misbehaving, disruptive, overactive, and aggressive. These children were involved in many procedural and behavioral interactions with teachers, and were more likely to be boys. Concern children were perceived by teachers as being immature, dependent, low achievers who were unable to cope with all the demands of the student role. While inattentive at times, these children did not disrupt the class with their behavior. Teachers described indifference children as being passive, quiet, unemotional, and of average ability. Classroom observations showed these children to be most distinguishable by their low rates of teacher interaction.

As can be seen from Brophy and Evertson's (1981) profiles, the student traits that influence teacher attitudes are closely related to the role requirements of teachers and students. One factor accounting for the nature of these findings may involve the public school classroom settings in which these studies were conducted. The

teacher-centered environment and routine nature of learning activities and teacher-student contacts places the main emphasis on achievement and role-related traits. Other traits, such as sociability and peer status are less mentioned in teacher descriptions of elementary-aged students (Morrison & McIntyre, 1969).

The student traits that influence teacher attitudes in more open learning environments, such as pre-kindergarten settings, may differ somewhat from the above findings. Pre-kindergarten settings are typically more child-centered. Teacher-student contacts are less structured, and teachers have more opportunity to observe children freely interacting with their peers. In these settings, characteristics such as peer status may also influence teacher attitudes.

While student characteristics are important in determining teacher attitudes, factors other than these characteristics may also play a role. Such factors could include differential teacher perceptions, preferences, or interpretations of childrens' behaviors. Thus, it is important to determine whether there is agreement across teachers in attitudes toward various children. This type of agreement would indicate that the same children tend to elicit similar attitudes in a number of teachers. Brophy and Good (1974) noted that this information is prerequisite to a model explaining the mechanics of teacher expectation effects. In one of the few attempts to obtain this type of information, Brophy and Evertson (1981) followed children from the first to the second grade and reported significant agreement in

teacher attitudes toward them. While this longitudinal study suggests consistent teacher attitudes toward specific children over time, no investigations have assessed the attitudes of several teachers working with the same children within the same time frame.

The present study was designed to assess the relative importance of both achievement orientation and peer relations to teacher attitudes toward young children in an open educational environment. Also, the study attempted to determine whether or not multiple teachers working with the same group of children report similar attitude profiles for specific children.

Method

Subjects

The subjects used consisted of preschool children and their teachers at a child development laboratory of a northwestern university. There were 10 boys and eight girls, aged 3.3 to 5.3 years who had been in attendance at the laboratories for at least four months. The children's socioeconomic status was predominantly middle class. Three children were from ethnic backgrounds other than Caucasian.

The 14 student teachers involved with this group of children were enrolled in a ten-week supervised practicum course. Teacher requirements included outside readings, planning activities, attending a half-hour pre-conference, interacting with the children for 2 1/2 hours, and evaluating the days activities during a one hour post-conference. Degree orientation and career goals for these

students involved earning a teaching certificate and teaching in the lower elementary grades. The 12 female and 2 male student teachers all had prior experience working with young children and were either juniors or seniors in academic standing.

Setting

The classroom setting was a child-centered, open environment. Two hours of each day were devoted to self-selected activities. During this time the children could move freely about in the classroom and select activities from those planned or other materials. Planned activities were not teacher intensive and could generally be accomplished with minimal teacher input. Student teachers were encouraged to guide the children by carefully arranging the environment rather than relying on direct teacher guidance. Careful observation of child behaviors was stressed as a key to understanding and assessing levels of child development.

Instruments

Teacher attitudes were measured by having each teacher nominate three children in response to each of four questions. Silberman (1969) first used these questions and the wording was slightly varied to better fit the educational setting.

Attachment. "If you were going to be in the laboratory next term and could pick one child from this group to be in the laboratory for the sheer joy of it, whom would you pick?"

Rejection. "If this group of children were to be reduced by one child, whom would you be relieved to have removed?"

Concern. "If you could devote all your attention to a child who concerns you a great deal, who would you pick?"

Indifference. "If a parent were to drop in unannounced for a conference, which child would you be least prepared to talk about?"

Scores for each child were obtained by weighting the nominations (first choices receiving three points, second choices two points, and third choices one point) and summing across the different teachers' rankings.

Sociometric data was gathered by a technique similar to McCandless and Marshall (1957). Head and shoulder photographs were taken of each child. These pictures were then displayed individually to peers and each child made two nominations in response to the question, "Who do you like to play with best?". First choices received two points, second choices received one point. A positive sociometric status score for each child was obtained by summing across peer nominations. A similar procedure was followed to obtain negative sociometric status scores with each child responding to the question, "Who do you like to play with least?". Positive and negative sociometric status have been used extensively in the social development literature as measures of peer popularity and peer rejection, respectively. Reliability estimates with preschool children have yielded moderate test-retest correlation coefficients ranging from .33 to .79 for peer popularity (Asher et al., 1979, Krantz, Webb, & Andrews, 1984; McCandless and Marshall, 1957; Moore and Updegraff, 1964) and .42 for peer rejection (Asher, et al., 1979), with one to four weeks time intervals between

testings.

The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test - Revised (PPVT-R) was used as an achievement-oriented measure. Children were presented with plates containing four pictures and were instructed to point to the picture that matches the word said by the examiner. Scores are calculated by establishing a basal number of responses and a ceiling level. By using extensive tables provided with this test, standardized scores were obtained. The PPVT-R has been carefully normed, standardized, and well established in terms of reliability and validity (Dunn & Dunn, 1981).

Procedure

The data on teacher attitudes was gathered at the beginning of a pre-conference on the last Tuesday of each quarter. (The preschool did not operate on Mondays). This allowed three non-contact days to control for memorable interactions the student teachers may have had with the children on previous days. Similarly, a room other than the classroom was used to eliminate such environmental cues. The student teachers were informed they were taking part in a research activity that would not be graded. Each of the student teachers was given a roster of all the children. Half of these were in alphabetical order and half were in reverse alphabetical order. The student teachers were then asked to nominate three children in response to each question regarding attacment, rejection, concern, and indifference (ARCI).

Data for the positive and negative sociometric scores, and the PPVT-R were gathered by trained research assistants. A small testing room adjacent to the classroom was used for all assessments.

Results

Due to the ordinal nature of the data, Kendall correlation coefficients of sociometric status and ARCI were computed. Peer popularity was positively and significantly correlated with teacher attachment (r=.3991, p=.021). An inverse relationship between peer popularity and teacher concern approached significance (r=-.3198, p=.058). And a directional, but not significant, negative correlation between peer popularity and teacher rejection (r=-.2232, p=.133) was also obtained.

Peer rejection was positively and significantly correlated with teacher concern (r=.3421, p=.049). An inverse relationship between peer rejection and attachment approached significance (r=-.3038, p=.062). There was also a non-significant but directional positive correlation between peer rejection and teacher rejection (r=.2182, p=.141). Peer popularity and rejection were not significantly related to teacher indifference. (Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

Scores on the PPVT-R were significantly and negatively correlated with teacher indifference (r=-.3313, p=.046) and approached significance with teacher rejection (r=-.2860, p=.080). A positive correlation between the PPVT-R and teacher attachment also approached significance (r=.3125, p=.055). A directional, but not significant, negative correlation between the PPVT-R and teacher concern (r=-.2335, p=.130) was also obtained.

Findings on teacher agreement in attitudes are reported descriptively. For each question on teacher attitudes, 18 nominations were made. (Each of the six teachers made three nominations). It was possible, then, for each of the 18 children to be chosen in response to each of the questions. Clearly this was not the situation. All 18 teacher concern nominations were accounted for by only seven children. Eight children accounted for the rejection nominations, and nine children accounted for the indifference nominations. Attachment appeared to be more widely spread, with 12 children accounting for the nominations.

Further evidence of teacher agreement comes from Kendall correlations between attachment, rejection, and concern. Rejection and concern were significantly correlated ($r=.6903$, $p=.001$). Interestingly, the same five children who accounted for 83% of the concern nominations also received 73% of the rejection nominations. Negative correlations between attachment and concern ($r=-.3296$, $p=.060$) and attachment and rejection ($r=-.2802$, $p=.090$) approached significance.

Discussion

The correlations between sociometric status and ARCI suggest that teacher attitudes parallel the attitudes that children have towards one another. Children who were popular with their peers were responded to by teachers with attachment and not rejection or concern. Conversely, children who were unpopular with their peers were not chosen as attached by teachers, and were generally responded to by teachers with

rejection and concern.

Three different explanations may account for this pattern. Teacher attitudes towards children could be influenced by the attitudes that children have towards one another. The reverse of this proposition would hold that teacher attitudes towards individual children influence the attitudes that they form about their peers. A third possibility is that specific characteristics of a child may influence the formation of both peer and teacher attitudes in a similar matter.

A mediating factor in the first two of these possibilities involves the type of classroom environment. As described earlier, the classroom in this study used an open environment and a child-centered approach. Student teachers were encouraged to learn about the children through careful observation. Given these conditions, it is plausible that the attitudes children took toward their peers could have influenced teacher attitudes. In more traditional classrooms, knowledge of children through careful observation in naturalistic settings is not emphasized. In fact, previous studies using more traditional classrooms found teachers perceptions about peer status to be less accurate than perceptions about achievement oriented behaviors (Morrison & McIntyre, 1969; Jenkins 1972).

The possibility that specific characteristics of a child may similarly influence the attitudes of peers and teachers is supported by the findings on teacher agreement. The same few children accounted for the majority of rejection and concern nominations. These children were

also regarded as unpopular by their peers. It seems plausible, then, that student teachers and other children reacted in similar ways to particular characteristics exhibited by these children.

The relationships between the PPVT-R and ARCI are consistent with the profiles of these children presented earlier (Brophy & Evertson, 1981). Teachers were attached to high-achieving children and rejected or were concerned about low-achieving children.

When taken together, these relationships of peer status and achievement to teacher attitudes have two important implications. The first is that in an open educational environment, peer status also plays a role in determining teacher attitudes. At all age levels, then, the type of educational environment appears to deserve further investigation as to how it may mediate the formation of teacher attitudes or expectations. The second implication specifically involves young children. Since pre-kindergarten learning environments are typically less structured and more child-centered, the sociometric status of these children may be particularly potent in influencing teacher attitudes. With pre-kindergarten settings being the first step in many childrens' schooling, teacher-child relationships at this early stage may set a pattern that carries over into the elementary schools.

Interestingly, the student teachers did not discriminate between rejection and concern children. From the way the ARCI questions were posed to the student teachers, the same children who received rejection nomination could also receive concern nominations, which was in fact the case. In acknowledging that the profiles of these two groups of

children are similar, Brophy and Rohrkemper (1981) discuss a theory of causal attribution that may be useful in differentiating between them. Amount of child effort, intentionality of behavior, and frustrated desires are the key elements. Children who make an earnest effort to succeed in the classroom, but whose desires are frustrated because of low ability or immaturity are likely to elicit concern from teachers. Other children, who do not try hard to succeed and intentionally disrupt the classroom, frustrate the desires of teachers and are likely to be rejected. Clearly, the situation may not always be as clear cut as presented here.

This theory may also account for the failure of the student teachers to discriminate between rejected and concern children. Lack of knowledge or experience in how to help immature or low ability children may frustrate the desires of student teachers. In this case, they may form the same type of attitude toward concern children as rejected children. Teachers with more experience, such as the ones used in earlier studies (Brophy & Evertson, 1981) may be less frustrated by immature or low ability children. Experience and knowledge may be factors that allow teachers to discriminate between rejected and concern children. Further research using experienced preschool teachers could clarify this issue.

Children receiving indifference teacher nominations did not appear to be popular or unpopular. There was also less teacher agreement on the indifference nominations. It took more children to account for the indifference nominations than it did to account for the rejection and

concern nominations. This might indicate that teachers' indifference attitudes may be more individualized than other attitudes and less associated with specific social characteristics of the child.

Indifference children did tend to score low on the PPVT-R. In this respect, Willis and Brophy (1974) proposed that indifference children and concern children are similar. However, indifference children, are believed to respond less well to teacher efforts to improve their performance. The current findings on indifference supports the descriptions of these children in previous research as being most readily identified by their lack of outstanding characteristics.

After only ten weeks with the children, the student teachers agreed on which children were rejected and concerned. There was less agreement across the student teachers as to which children were attached. For rejected and concern children, then, it appears that teacher attitudes and expectations may have a greater impact. From an early age these children are consistently recognized by different teachers. As yet, the linkages between teacher attitudes and actual treatment of various children are poorly understood (Brophy, 1983). Due to the agreement across teachers, however, it appears that the effects of teacher expectations and the concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy may be more salient for some children than others.

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